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1

The Invention of American Art, 1825–1945

The arts in America are, in many ways, the invention of a group of influential, rich Bostonians called the “Brahmins.”¹ Before 1850, there were few distinctions between American forms of entertainment. Operettas, symphonic pieces, and comedic songs would be featured on the same concert bill; portraits and landscape paintings hung next to stuffed animals; and Shakespearean plays were followed by performances of contortionists.² Most culture organizations were commercial enterprises, owned by entrepreneurs like P. T. Barnum, who had a for-profit museum, and Theodore Thomas, the most renowned figure in orchestral music at the time.³

Between 1850 and 1900, bourgeois urban elites built organizations that could define, isolate, and “sacralize” some of this culture.⁴ To view these fields as art, people needed to have “a vocabulary of concepts and adjectives, reasoning logics, and justifications to explain . . . aesthetic qualities.”⁵ “High” art was “grand,” “good,” and “best,” like what could be found “in all the large European cities”—“true” and not “vulgar.”⁶ This “sacralization” of high art, with a “strong and clearly defined” boundary between it and entertainment, established the outlines of a legitimate, elite culture.⁷

Museums and Symphony Orchestras

The decisions made within the Boston Museum of Art and the Boston Symphony Orchestra would have a sizeable influence over what cultural objects

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and performances other organizations would select to display, and, therefore, what Americans would define as “art.” They would also influence the kinds of people who would have the authority to make these decisions. The Boston Brahmins were those kinds of people: a highly connected, self-conscious social group tied together by kinship, philanthropic endeavors, commerce, and club life. Threatened by waves of immigration and an emerging middle class, they were driven to create a boundary around refined tastes to symbolically mark their cultural and social superiority.⁸

As argued by sociologist Paul DiMaggio, Brahmins engaged in three key activities while inventing art in America. First, they adapted the existing organizational form of the nonprofit corporation—familiar to them from their educational and philanthropic experience—to a new purpose. Second, they engaged in the classification of works as art or entertainment. In making decisions about what works to exhibit or to present in performance, these elites introduced distinctions between what was museum-worthy and what was not, between what was symphony-worthy and what was merely entertaining. Finally, they taught audiences how to relate to art—how to behave in its presence, how to make meaning from viewing it. Their challenge was estimable:

Boston’s cultural capitalists would have to find a form able to achieve all these aims: a single organizational base for each art form; institutions that could claim to serve the community, even as they defined the community to include only the elite and upper-middle classes; and enough social distance between art and audience, between performer and public, to permit the mystification necessary to define a body of artistic work as sacred.⁹

In orchestral music, for instance, the sacralization process involved a shift from playing work by contemporary authors to playing compositions authored by a small number of “great” dead composers.¹⁰ (Sacralization, in this sense, refers to the process by which people begin to talk about some works as if they were separate from everyday life—“sacred.” It does not refer to the content of the works themselves, nor is it meant to indicate any “religious” content, although that may be present in some work.) Through the efforts of the Brahmins, “high culture” became a strongly classified, consensually defined body of art distinct from “popular” fare.¹¹

It is important to note that the establishment of an artistic canon in Boston influenced, but did not determine, the activities of arts organizations elsewhere. For example, three decades after the Boston Museum of Art was

founded, the Art Institute of Chicago still included a curatorial department called the “Antiquarian Society,” staffed by women who collected “lace, fans, textiles, antiques, and occasional sculpture.” The acquisition of “non-artistic” objects and works by amateurs indicates the gradual and uneven application of artistic legitimization processes.¹² In New York, the existence of a relatively large and powerful middle class meant that elites were never able to exert exclusive control over arts organizations, and commercial orchestras survived their invention.¹³ The New York elite was large and fractured, so contending nonprofits emerged, competing for audience members and donor dollars by developing particularized programming long after the Boston Symphony’s repertoire had become limited and repetitive.¹⁴ Despite dissimilar starting conditions in the two cities, according to DiMaggio, “the increasingly national institutional basis of high and popular cultures . . . eroded regional differences.”¹⁵

Rationalizing Governance

While elites like the Brahmins formed and governed these organizations, the organizations received public charters and municipal aid and were institutionally committed to provide service to the “masses.”¹⁶ The evidence suggests that most founder-trustees were proud to be engaged in service work on behalf of their communities. They built cultural centers similar to those in Europe but founded them on American, democratic principles. Orchestras and museums were designed to educate, promote moral uplift and enlightenment, and produce and reinforce a shared public culture—something we might view as critical to a modern, heterogeneous republic.¹⁷

Arts organizations were chartered as public institutions and eventually granted nonprofit status as *educational* organizations. Wall labels, tours, program books, lectures, classes for amateurs, and other programming were designed for the purpose of training the public to understand great works of art. Free or subsidized admissions programs and school tours targeted young, poor, and new audiences. Institutionally, nonprofit organizations were bound to principles of service, even while their governors defined and required respect for highbrow culture, without input or appeal.¹⁸ While the invention of “high art” in America depended on the work and tastes of elites, the story of the arts in America is incomplete if it is a tale of the noblesse oblige of the wealthy; rather, it is better characterized by the tension between elitism and populism.

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This tension is nowhere clearer than in the strain over the increasingly rationalized governance structures of art museums. From 1870 to 1900, fewer than five museums per year were founded in the United States. Born into wealthy families, their directors were “art men” with connections to artists and collectors who bought or donated works, helped administer finances, and even engaged in artistic direction. In recruiting these art men, the criteria included a “pleasant demeanor,” familial social ties to powerful people, and good taste.¹⁹ In 1910, the president of the American Association of Museums asserted that “a curator is born and not made. I do not believe you can train a man to be a curator. He is the result of natural ability and circumstances. He must be a man . . . who must know something of everything and everything of something. Such a man is difficult to find.”²⁰ There was little training available to educate curators, preservationists, or museum administrators in the task of managing these organizations. The abjuring of formal job criteria, and reliance on charismatic authority, affirms an institutional reliance on patrimonial staff arrangements and helps to explain why administrators in this era were praised by trustees but failed to engage the public. While they were legally serving the educational needs of the public, these administrators were organizationally subject only to the approval of the board members. This also helps us to understand why criteria governing standards of “artistic excellence” were not immediately and universally adopted.

Wealthy founder-trustees unquestionably felt a sense of ownership over these organizations, even while paid staff did much of the work. Reviewing this moment in American history, one commenter noted that board members could have viewed a museum as

an extension of their livingroom, where they could enjoy parties and theatricals; an educational institution of a quasi-tutorial or finishing-school type; a gallery to professional artists; an ‘attic’ to store personal collections in security while vacationing; or memorials for the dead and, importantly, a locus for cementing contacts with similarly situated individuals.²¹

Wealthy founder-trustees benefited from their control over these organizations, enjoying them both as entertainment and as mechanisms to advance their social, economic, and political capital.

The first full-time director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and perhaps also its most colorful, was General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, an Italian military veteran who built powerful links to New York elites as a language

tutor. After surviving capture by the Confederate army and then a court-martial for misappropriating funds during the Civil War, Cesnola married a New York City debutante. He then took a series of positions in the consular services, and, while posted in Cyprus, he trained himself as an amateur archaeologist. Cesnola came to the attention of the museum board when he began selling his archaeological finds (some of which proved to be fabricated from fragments of broken statues) upon his return to New York.²² Once he was installed as the director of the Met, Cesnola had his glass-faced office built on the balcony of the museum building and surveilled his employees at his leisure, wearing metal-studded shoes so they would snap to attention when they heard him approach.²³ His autocratic governance, impresarial management style, and unethical management of the museum's finances were typical of directors from this era.

As arts organizations grew in number, size, and complexity, they could no longer be run by administrators whose qualifications rested primarily on their networks and taste. Curatorial or programming decisions were increasingly made with an eye toward encyclopedic, canonical, and democratic concerns, although trustee preferences could still govern individual decisions. A shift in the kinds of people who were allowed to make decisions about what counted as art was taking place. At this moment in American history, nonprofit trustees were joined by an emerging class of professional administrators.

Colleges and universities provided critical support to the professionalization of arts administration and curatorial work. While in 1876 just seven universities offered courses in art history or appreciation (a qualifying course of study for the curatorial arts), by 1930 almost every college and university offered them. These courses were consolidated into art history departments, and graduates of these programs eroded the dominance of "art men." Academic art historians who worked as consultants to museums or art dealers exerted additional influence on the institutionalization of administrative practices.²⁴

The creation of trade organizations like the Association of American Museums marked another key moment in the artistic legitimization process. Along with the College Art Association and the American Federation of the Arts, the Association of American Museums worked to establish not just professional ethics, but also standards for the care and preservation of objects, the design of exhibitions, codes of conduct for employees and board members, and even guidelines for the teaching of art in universities.²⁵ National philanthropic foundations like the Carnegie Corporation and the

Rockefeller philanthropies lent economic and human resources to support the professionalization of the arts field.²⁶ Once European refugees fleeing fascism arrived in the US in great numbers, the market for curators exploded so quickly that professional associations stepped in to regulate hiring through employment services.²⁷ A similar process was playing out in music, including, importantly, a shift from instruction in music performance to instruction in music appreciation and theory (in addition to the other steps noted above).²⁸

The rationalization of administration and the creation of arts administration as a profession is a critical step in the artistic legitimization process. After all, legitimacy is evaluated as a function of both “the right to make claims, and the bases on which those claims are made.”²⁹ Academic training and credentials, and affiliation with a professional association, are commonly accepted bases for the right to make claims of legitimacy. As arts administrators acquired these credentials and affiliations, they acquired the right to make claims and influence what forms of culture were presented as art.

The creation of the nonprofit arts organization was of extraordinary importance to the history of culture in America. Brahmins established organizations (the Boston Museum of Art) and institutions (the idea of “art in America”) that remain at the core of culture today. While we can certainly appreciate and value the staying power of these organizations and institutions, we must simultaneously understand that the relationship between art and popular culture is, and always has been, dynamic. This fungible boundary between art and entertainment is characteristic of the second wave of artistic legitimization, which touched modern dance and ballet, theater, and opera.

The Second Wave: Ballet, Modern Dance, Theater, and Opera

While classical music and the visual arts achieved their legitimacy as high culture by the start of the nineteenth century, the same was not the case for theater, opera, modern dance, or ballet. Each of these was a form of commercial culture, so they all had to free themselves from the “grip of the market place” to “make credible the professions of ‘disinterestedness’ on which claims to high cultural status ride.”³⁰ In this section, I examine how the legitimization process—the process of defining, isolating, and sacralizing some domains as forms of high art—played out in each of these fields.

While, in each case, making “art” meant independence from the marketplace, advocates in each domain experimented with different funding models, failing in many cases to stay open for business. As university and individual patronage (and then foundation support) accumulated, each domain established a dominant funding model, and the critical establishment agreed on a set of valued artistic conventions, while training proceeded in an orderly fashion to repopulate the field with generations of performers. Finally, members of each field advocated for features of the emerging “American canon” of works, and contestations over what should be included featured significantly in debates during the maturation of each artistic field.

THEATER

The extension of the high culture model to theater would have seemed entirely unlikely in 1900. Commercial theater was extremely popular, not at all in need of elite patronage, and it “did not lend itself to the transcendent, quasi-religious discourse employed to sacralize classical music or the visual arts.”³¹ Nevertheless, it adopted the high culture model far earlier than opera or ballet.

Between 1910 and 1940, advocates worked to create over one thousand noncommercial stages in what might now be referred to as “alternative spaces,” a number that peaked in 1929.³² These forms of community theater were distinguished from their commercial peers by several features: they relied on both ticket sales and donations to support their costs; they had few, if any, paid, professional staff members; and they were dedicated to an educational function—teaching citizens how to act and teaching audiences how to enjoy new forms of theatrical content.³³

Advocates of the burgeoning noncommercial theater movement made clear that they were producing an alternative to commercial theater and projecting “an image of reform, struggling against a conservative corporate society,” adopting what amounted to a “spirit of anti-commercialism.”³⁴ For example, in 1910, the Drama Committee of Boston’s Twentieth Century Club published a report in which it upbraided theater owners for failing to classify productions by quality and merit.³⁵ This criticism of the blurring of entertainment and art was joined with reprimands around appropriate, “respectful” audience behavior. If commercial culture was characterized by audience-driven programming and evaluated based on sales, these critics sought to define an artistic theater that was the opposite: driven by artistic values and assessment.

The impulse to legitimate theater was clearly present by this point, and the rejection of musical comedies from its stages indicates growing consensus around the boundaries of the canon and modes of audience appreciation. To wit, one theater director, writing in 1928, suggested that an audience for comical, light dramas didn't belong in a community theater playhouse; he pointed to the "fine distinction between amusement, which is a proper function of the commercial theater, and enjoyment, which is the object of the Play House," or nonprofit community theater.³⁶ He was not alone in suggesting that the educational function of community theater was served, in part, by *training* audiences to enjoy their productions: "Such an audience has to be built up slowly," he argued, "just as does the patronage of the art galleries, the libraries and the orchestras."³⁷

The link with educational and reformist ends existed not only in community theater programming, nor in the notion that it was "one way of training intelligent audiences, though a slow one."³⁸ On community theater stages, untrained local actors intermingled with performers "trained at elite schools like Carnegie Institute of Technology," Harvard, and Yale, and writers, activists, and professors found their way to noncommercial theater.³⁹ Universities played host to conferences that served to unite and coordinate efforts in the "Little Theatre movement"; in 1925, a "Conference on the Drama in American Universities and Little Theatres" was hosted by the Carnegie Institute of Technology, the first university to offer a theater degree.⁴⁰ The legitimation of theater received critical forms of support from higher-education organizations.

Participants in the Little Theatre movement wrote and mounted plays that ranged from abstract and avant-garde to trenchant, realist social critique. While "abstract, rhythmic, stark productions garner[ed] more attention in print, the pull and fascination of realism and the recognizable made Little Theatre usable for 'bohemians' and reformers in the 1910s as well as for educators, civic boosters, and the spiritually hungry."⁴¹ In fact, some argue that the "American belief that theatre is spiritually and emotionally fulfilling, socially elevating, of civic importance, a site for assaying social change, and an enriching locus of cultural capital" originated in these years.⁴² Advocates for this domestic theater movement believed that it could "offer its participants and audiences a chance to explore social issues and to resist the numbing lure of predictably scripted spectacle shows. They believed that on a personal and also a collective level, Little Theatre could improve American society."⁴³

Theater was supported by a wealthy patronage of women and Jews who subsidized art houses. Still, most theaters were forced to charge admission, and prices were set high enough that few working- or lower-middle-class people could afford to attend.⁴⁴ One financial model in common use involved audience groups collaborating to buy advance block tickets or subscriptions to secure the staging of a production.⁴⁵ A second model, which may have begun at the Toy Theatre of Boston, combined a shareholding model with something like a membership subscription, offering buyers both season seats and a share of the profits.⁴⁶ However, most theaters that made this move perished in the attempt, and, of those that remained committed to amateur production, the majority became private social clubs that staged a small number of crowd-pleasing, entertaining but escapist plays.⁴⁷

Other theater organizations adapted organizational structures and institutional practices from proximal arts fields. Henry Jewett's Boston Repertory Company (est. 1916) was incorporated as a trust for "educational, literary and artistic purposes," run by a board with civic and educational leaders, and was exempt from local taxes.⁴⁸ The organizations that attracted subsidy and managed to survive and grow moved into larger houses, hoping to "finance growth and professionalize with subscription revenues."⁴⁹ The Cleveland Playhouse (CPH) was consciously modeled on a symphony orchestra and described by its director as "a resident producing theatre, professionally organized, and operated not for profit and trusted by a representative group of people drawn from the cultural, social and business life of the city of Cleveland."⁵⁰

Although most of these theaters ultimately failed to remain solvent, they provided a model for nonprofit theater organizations. They also "were part of a movement that made theater legitimate" even if it took another two decades before that perception was widespread among Americans.⁵¹ According to many, "it was the Little Theatre movement that generated the college theater major, the inclusion of theatre in secondary school curriculums, and the prototypes for nonprofit producing."⁵² By 1929, the nonprofit organizational form was common enough that a Carnegie Corporation survey of the field could conclude that "because [theaters] are incorporated on a nonprofit-making basis and devoted to an educational purpose, they have succeeded in escaping certain taxes, along with schools and art museums."⁵³

In fact, some theaters had relationships with other nonprofits, suggesting any isomorphism was a result of some direct learning that took place, leading to one description of "the association of drama, the poor drab of the arts,

with her more pampered sisters.”⁵⁴ Art museums were particularly common partners, as in the case of the Goodman Theatre (associated with the Chicago Art Institute) and the Little Theatre Society of Indiana (John Herron Art Institute).

Finally, the emergence of the motion picture industry played a critical role in the legitimation of theater. Working-class audiences were better able to afford an evening’s entertainment at the movies, and observers noted lower-income audience members had left the theater for the movies as early as 1912.⁵⁵ By that time, a ticket to a film was one-fifth the cost of a theater seat. “Movie palaces” were being built and theaters refurbished to show films in towns and cities across the country. In the fifteen years leading up to 1925, the number of halls operating as theaters outside of New York dropped from 1,490 to 564.⁵⁶ With working-class audiences absent, theater was a *de facto* form of elite entertainment, encouraging a widespread perception of its status as an art form and of film as popular entertainment.

The legitimation process for theater involved defining, isolating, and sacralizing some culture as “art” and distinguishing it from commercial, popular fare. It was accomplished by reputational entrepreneurs—not the cloistered elites we found in Boston, nor a loose aggregation of wealthy men in New York, but a confederation of Jews, women, immigrants, and intellectuals that created new organizations, adapted older ones, and established ties with communities and universities. Over time, isomorphic pressures resulted in the resemblance of theater to other arts organizations and the adoption of the trustee-governed nonprofit form. Theater maintained throughout its central commitment to the creation of avant-garde, anticommercial, populist, and civic-minded, realist drama—a constellation of topical matter that would contribute to an interdisciplinary “American” artistic canon. It might come as no surprise, then, that the Cleveland Play House decided in 1917 to adopt the motto “Art in Democracy.”⁵⁷

MODERN DANCE AND BALLET

As in theater, advocates for American dance fought to distinguish their work from commercial forms of popular culture. While American ballet dancers made their careers in Europe and filled the lower ranks of the opera ballet corps, dance in the United States was a *mélange* of commercial and academic styles, including clogging, cake walks, Spanish dances, and “aesthetic gymnastics.”⁵⁸ Reputational entrepreneurs who wanted to distance themselves from associations with sex work programmed stages with only “re-

finéd vaudeville” acts, performed for women or college students. In fact, “‘ballet girl’ had a pejorative connotation until the mid-twentieth century,” so closely aligned were such “girls” with sex work.⁵⁹ Those seeking to legitimate ballet would dance in costumes that, ironically, gave them the appearance of figures in a classic painting or a sculpture, and dancers often performed to a classical or symphonic score, cloaking their performance with legitimacy.

Ballet wouldn’t begin its ascent into the arts and nonprofit organizational contexts until the 1930s. As one scholar opines, “Of what are today the two major forms of artistic dance . . . [in the 1930s] ballet was merely ‘a shadow of grand opera’ . . . The other, aesthetic or ‘modern’ dance, was inchoate, a hazy figure on the busy ground of the vaudeville stage. Practitioners of each were in moral and aesthetic disrepute.”⁶⁰

This haze began to dissipate as forms of freer movement coalesced into styles, first in the studio of impresario Isadora Duncan, and, later, in the studios of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey.⁶¹ Educated middle-class women and newly formed university programs provided much of the support for this new kind of dance.⁶² The first program in dance education, fortuitously named “art-dance,” was initiated at Teachers College by Gertrude Colby.⁶³ Across the street, Bird Larson instituted a dance program at Barnard College in 1914; drawing upon anatomy and physics, she called her training program “Natural Rhythmic Expression.”⁶⁴ Several years later, in 1922, her Teachers College colleague would publish a book documenting her teaching methods, *Natural Rhythms and Dances*, which allowed for the dissemination of the “art-dance” curriculum.

While Teachers College and Barnard graduates may have seen the dancer as “a symbol of new-found personal, physical and sexual freedom, particularly for women . . . dance was still largely thought of as sinful and silly, precious and titillating, ‘fancy,’ ‘risqué,’ rarely serious. In 1920, American dance was nothing to ‘really’ think about.”⁶⁵

Academic programs continued to spread and find homes in a diversity of disciplines. Margaret H’Doubler staffed an undergraduate major in dancing at the University of Wisconsin by 1927 within its Department of Physical Education. At prestigious women’s colleges, modern dance found a place in the curriculum as “aesthetic gymnastics.”⁶⁶ H’Doubler’s mentee Martha Hill, along with her colleagues at Bennington College, “reoriented the nature of college dance during the 1930’s toward a vocational and professional model, reshaping dance as an arts-based discipline,” pushing back against a curriculum grounded in physical education.⁶⁷

Despite their divergent perspectives, H'Doubler and Hill would work together within the American Physical Education Association (APEA) to design national standards for dance education. They were successful in petitioning the organization to create a national section on dancing. They relied especially on the support of Mabel Lee, the first female president of APEA, who took office the year their section was approved.⁶⁸ The first stages of modern dance's artistic legitimation depended on the labor of educated female advocates.

Support for modern dance forms remained in university incubators and elite enclaves for much of the remaining century. While some dance programs established themselves as artistic disciplines, most remained affiliated with physical education programs until the 1972 Title IX and 1974 Equal Educational Opportunity Act. The passage of this legislation resulted in the merge of physical education departments with coeducational programs. In many cases, dance programs were moved into newly created "Colleges of Fine Arts." Once they were housed with programs in music, visual arts, and theater, dance curricula were reshaped to resemble instruction in these fields. Dance students were no longer only trained in dance history and performance, but also took courses in "critical thinking skills, deconstruction and reconstruction, critical analysis, comparative and evaluative analyses, etc. as well as in cultural, historical, social and artistic contexts of dance."⁶⁹ Thus, modern dance acquired the dimensions of an artistic discipline.

Modern dance was seen as having a "uniquely American movement vocabulary." In contrast, ballet was "dismissed by many as a decadent Old World import that could not truly speak to the experiences of the young nation." Ballet was also viewed as an expressive form that failed to "advance the left-wing political beliefs to which numerous choreographers and performers—many of whom were women and Jews (or both) from marginalized immigrant populations—were passionately committed."⁷⁰ For these reasons, many argued that modern dance should be supported over and above ballet to form a distinctly American performance art.

In its struggle for artistic legitimacy, ballet had to seem of a piece with sculpture, painting, and classical music, but also equal to American modern dance, "which by 1934 had established its primacy as a high art practice."⁷¹ But it would be incomplete to cast the relationship between American modern dance and ballet in these years as that of competitors; they were united against their common enemy—commercial dance. For much of the twentieth century, ballet and modern dance "developed and defined themselves in a subtle if sometimes unacknowledged dialogue with one another as well

as through a shared antagonism toward existing popular and commercial dance cultures.”⁷²

American ballet had been performed for many years as an accompaniment to opera. Instruction was provided by American opera companies, or dancers learned and performed in Europe. In the United States, the first seed of independence was arguably planted by Lincoln Kirstein, who co-founded the School of American Ballet in 1934 with George Balanchine as artistic director and himself as director of theatrical sciences (and, from 1940, as school director). In 1935, the company, American Ballet, became the resident troupe at the Metropolitan Opera, an association that not only provided steady employment for dancers and legitimacy for dance but also encouraged the perception that it was a secondary or an ancillary form of entertainment. A brief examination of the troupe will reveal the obstacles and opportunities that ballet faced in establishing its legitimacy as an American art form.

A broadly engaged intellectual, Kirstein had been involved in editing a literary quarterly and in the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In 1936 Kirstein formed a traveling ballet company called Ballet Caravan, hastily organized “as a practical response to an array of institutional crises facing the American Ballet,” including Balanchine’s poor health.⁷³ A group of students at the School of American Ballet assembled; Kirstein designed it, in his words, to be “self-sufficient, using a dozen of our best dancers, who would also serve as stage managers and stagehands. We could travel by bus and truck with our own lighting equipment, portable switchboard, drapes, and bits of scenery.”⁷⁴ During the seven weeks of that summer tour, we witness in miniature the process by which ballet cashed in on, and then severed its association with, opera, capitalizing upon its association with artistic forms of modern American dance to accelerate the legitimation process.

Caravan’s summer 1936 tour began with a performance at the Bennington Festival, an annual event hosted by Bennington College in Vermont. The festival typically hosted only modern dance performances, so Kirstein’s request of founder and organizer Martha Hill for a slot must have come as some surprise; Kirstein was, after all, a somewhat outspoken critic of “what he regarded as modern dance’s less structured and more idiosyncratic movement vocabularies.”⁷⁵ While Hill was friendly to the idea, records indicate that other festival organizers objected. Hill’s solution was to schedule the Caravan’s performances separately from the official program (among “lectures, special events, recitals, and student demonstrations”).⁷⁶ According to Kirstein’s diaries, Caravan dancers feared they would face heckling on the

stage, but instead they received a warm welcome, including positive reviews from audience members and the press, and special praise from modern dance choreographer Martha Graham.⁷⁷

Caravan employed Frances Hawkins to manage its tour; Hawkins had established her reputation as a booking agent for modern dance groups and as Martha Graham's manager. The group subsequently patched together a summer season, completing twenty-five performances in seven weeks, making stops at other colleges and universities, civic auditoriums, film theaters, and private venues.⁷⁸ They continued on to Easthampton, Long Island, where the troupe enjoyed mention in the society pages as the "entertainment du jour," although the absence of any program details suggests they were "not invited due to any special interest on the part of the hosts in their artistic agenda."⁷⁹ For the grandes dames of the south shore, ballet was merely afternoon entertainment, as opposed to an enriching cultural experience.

The most important contribution of Caravan to American ballet may have been to create an organizational model that placed dance at the foreground of attention. For many decades, ballet had been relegated to a subordinate position on opera stages. The Caravan, particularly on tour, "boasted several innovations with respect to the institutional positioning of ballet performance in the existing cultural infrastructure, performing in venues previously not hospitable to ballet, whether city halls or summer stock theaters," while also presenting *ballet* as the main attraction.⁸⁰ But the model of the summer tour was borrowed directly from numerous *modern dance* companies.

Historical evidence supports the argument that American ballet entrepreneurs like Kirstein relied upon the organizational structures and the institutional legitimacy of modern dance to push forward their own disciplinary aims. For the present argument, it matters very little if he consciously devised a parasitical strategy to rely on modern dance festivals, audiences, and booking agents to build ballet's legitimacy. It is, however, worth noting that many dance scholars argue that Kirstein's embrace of modern dance was a cunning and strategic decision.⁸¹

OPERA

For many years, ballet depended fiscally and programmatically on the existence of opera. American audiences of all classes enjoyed forms of operatic singing since the late nineteenth century.⁸² It was, at least until the nine-

teenth century, an important part of shared public culture in the United States.⁸³ To transform opera into art, reputational entrepreneurs needed to demarcate a canon of artistic works and provide organizational and institutional supports for them distinct from various forms of musical theater and light opera.

Until the 1930s, most opera companies were governed through trustee companies, with patrons controlling the houses and commercial bookers hiring the talent and producing the shows.⁸⁴ The reliance on commercial bookers was in part a function of the high cost of production, which included musicians, vocalists, dancers, a chorus, and set designers, among others. With commercial entrepreneurs in charge, stages hosted a variety of kinds of musical performance, all designed to delight the broadest possible paying audience. This meant that English-language translations of French, Italian, and German operas were preferred in many cases, as were English-language works in *opéra bouffe*, comic opera, and the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. As long as managers, designers, soloists, and stages were open to “grand opera, light opera, musical comedy, and vaudeville,” then the boundary of grand opera could not be defined, and the artistic legitimization of American opera could not proceed.⁸⁵

In order to define the boundaries of American opera, isolate it from commercial entertainment, and sacralize it, advocates had to establish spaces dedicated to operatic performance. The Metropolitan Opera House (Met Opera) in New York opened in 1883, founded itself as a stock company, and sold shares to men of new wealth who were unable to buy box seats at the older Academy Opera. One newspaper reported that opening-night box seats at the Met Opera were occupied by those whose combined wealth amounted to \$540 million—so this “new wealth” was substantial.⁸⁶ New-wealth families defended their control over the organization by requiring that “transfers of shares required ratification by the shareholders as a group.”⁸⁷ Yet these opera companies still depended upon commercial booking agents to provide the programming. These agents’ desire to find and satisfy a market is evident in the programmatic game of whack-a-mole they played during the first several seasons: Italian opera in the first, German in the second, Italian and French after the house was rebuilt in 1893, and a *mélange* of *opéra bouffe*, theater, and grand opera for some time thereafter.⁸⁸ Seeing an opportunity, entrepreneur Oscar Hammerstein opened the Manhattan Opera House in 1906, specializing in a French and Italian repertoire and big-name stars. His concerts drew huge crowds of New Yorkers, as well as substantial press attention.

In 1908, the Met Opera responded by announcing it would no longer operate for profit, and revenues would be dedicated toward the improvement of the company and to a pension fund for artists.⁸⁹ The president of the Met Opera, Otto Kahn, and the vice president of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, William Vanderbilt, bought the stock of any shareholder who opposed this transition.⁹⁰ Yet the Met Opera still failed to out-compete Hammerstein's commercial Manhattan Opera House in either its first or second season. Kahn, Vanderbilt, and their board responded a second time, but with a different business strategy: they formed a trust. Leveraging their relationships with theater owners in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, they began locking up the rights to performances and performers. Now faced with a significant competitive disadvantage, Hammerstein took a \$1.2 million payday and handed over the rights to his property, performance rights, and contracts with many of his star performers to the trust, along with a promise to refrain from producing opera in major cities for a ten-year period.⁹¹ Though the Chicago and Philadelphia companies broke with the Met Opera soon thereafter, and the Boston Opera Company closed, the New York opera engaged Toscanini as a conductor and enjoyed a twenty-year period of profitable administration.⁹²

In 1931, the Met Opera trust transformed into a national network of nonprofit houses. The shift to a nonprofit organizational model was seen as decisive in promoting its dominance among American opera organizations.⁹³ But it had struggled to get there, seeing a \$1.1 million cash reserve disappear in the two years before it converted to a nonprofit organization. During the conversion, the board increased in size, cut costs, initiated fundraising drives, and made an effort to present the organization as an educational service organization. Seat prices were lowered, some shows were broadcast on the radio, American performers were used more often, and a supplementary season of English opera was offered at even lower seat prices.⁹⁴ At least one historian viewed this as a watershed event, because "opera as 'high culture' [was] linked physically and finally to its institutional model."⁹⁵

PATHWAYS TO ARTISTIC LEGITIMACY

First museums and symphonies adopted the nonprofit organizational form; modern dance, ballet, opera, and theater then followed suit. Each had to free itself from ties to forms of popular commercial entertainment. When entrepreneurs presented commercial entertainment, they elided distinctions between forms of culture to fill the house, happily programming

comedic opera and grand opera, modern dance and ballet together. Art theaters benefited from associations with museums, ballet companies from their work with opera companies and modern dance troupes. Opera companies modeled themselves on symphonies, after having tried other management models. While entrepreneurs, administrators, and creators in each of these disciplines relied on, learned from, and even piggybacked on each others' initiatives to advance their own agendas, establishing the boundaries of a new art form depends upon demarcating it from other disciplines.⁹⁶

Nonprofit organizations isolate culture and sacralize it, allowing domain experts to provide audience members with an understanding of how to appreciate each art form. Associations with universities are critical to this process, as they educate and engage young people, providing future audiences for high-culture organizations. Universities also lend credibility to culture, as cultural authorities that engage in criticism, analysis, and classification.

Some have argued that the growth of a salaried and professional middle class at the start of the twentieth century gave way to widespread status anxieties within this group. It was a period marked by “progressive politics, middle-class assertiveness and attempts—albeit often patronizing—at urban reform and cultural enlightenment.”⁹⁷ Since high culture carried with it associations of elite social status, some members of the upper middle class were drawn toward arts participation.⁹⁸

Multiple indicators reveal a swell of interest in the arts during the 1920s among the middle classes. First, as opera, theater, and ballet moved with varying speed and success toward adopting the nonprofit organizational model, there was an explosion of museum foundings at the start of the twentieth century, fueled, some argue, by “growing public interest in elite culture.”⁹⁹ Second, there was a 75 percent increase in the number of people reporting their employment as artists, sculptors, and art teachers between 1920 and 1930.¹⁰⁰ Third, surveys from the 1930s suggest high and rising levels of domestic arts engagement in the form of piano and phonograph ownership, music lessons, instrument playing, radio listenership, and attendance at performing arts events.¹⁰¹ These indicators of artistic engagement are critical to the present argument, as they suggest a relationship between the organizational and institutional changes outlined above and changing cultural tastes. Establishing a causal link between macro- and meso-level structural changes and tastes is challenging given the number of mediating and mitigating factors, but generating evidence of a correspondence between the advance of artistic legitimation and artistic tastes is an important first step, and one we take in the next section.

Early Life Exposure

In 1973, the Americans and the Arts survey (fielded by the National Research Center of the Arts) contained a series of items in which interviewees were asked about their level of exposure to the arts when they were growing up.¹⁰² Respondents were selected via a multistage, cluster, random-sampling design; thus, when weighted, the data are representative of the US population at the time.¹⁰³ Respondents were asked:

When you were growing up how often did you go to [activity] with your family or with friends—often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?

The survey ($N = 3,005$) asked this question for seven activities: 1) plays, 2) art museums, 3) concerts, 4) opera, 5) science or natural history museums, 6) historical sites, and 7) ballet/modern dance. Six of these activities (excepting science museums) count as arts-participation activities.¹⁰⁴ The preceding historical analysis suggests that we should see higher levels of exposure to art museums and opera in the oldest cohorts, and to plays, ballet, and modern dance among those born in the interwar years.

The results demonstrate that children born in the post-Progressive era experienced higher odds of having at least some exposure to the arts when they were young than members of the immediately preceding cohorts (see figure A.1 in appendix A). Americans born in the late 1930s, 1940s, and the first half of the 1950s reported having experienced (substantively and statistically) significantly higher levels of childhood exposure to theater, ballet and modern dance, music concerts, art museums, and historical monuments than those born before 1930.

For instance, while somebody born in the 1910s or 1920s had a less than 30-percent chance of having visited an art museum while growing up, people born in the later 1930s to the early 1950s had closer to a 40-percent chance of having this experience. Differences are starker with respect to attendance at historical sites, with those born before 1930 demonstrating more equivocal results.¹⁰⁵ In all, these figures provide evidence for the notion that those born between the 1930s and 1950 experienced greater levels of childhood exposure to the arts than their parents. Indeed, their parents would have witnessed the birth of ballet, modern dance, and artistic theater, as well as profound investments in the creation of historical monuments, thanks to the New Deal. With the exception of opera, orchestral music, and museums, their parents would likely not have been able to ac-

cess any of these cultural forms in their childhoods due to the small number of venues, their concentration in a handful of eastern cities, and their relatively low status.

Indeed, the historical analysis indicates that museums and symphony orchestras enjoyed a “first mover” advantage, having asserted their hold on the American arts in some cases a full century before the others. They accounted for the majority of philanthropic foundation arts spending between 1920 and 1940. They invested some of those funds to support a ground campaign that spread awareness of their canons, using public school teachers and womens’ clubs as advocates. The effect was felt in higher education, as painting, sculpture, and “classical” music were the only disciplines that entered the core curriculum of most colleges and universities as humanistic disciplines after World War I.¹⁰⁶ By the start of the New Deal, you could speak of the “seven arts” (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, dance, drama) but they were, in fact, points on a spectrum “varying in prestige, institutional stability, and the degree to which each was insulated from commercial entertainments.”¹⁰⁷

The pace at which America legitimated these art forms was slow, which serves to remind us that, while works of art may connote indelible, trans-historical value and prestige, their presence in our culture is contingent and arbitrary. It took more than a hundred years to create what existed elsewhere (notably, in Europe).

What Is an “American Art”?

Both ballet and opera companies struggled to establish themselves as American art forms. They were slow to assimilate to the “third party system” of mixed public and private funding that characterizes support for other art fields. Each ultimately relied on large infusions of cash from foundations to secure robust national systems to recruit, train, and support domestic producers and fund the staging of an American canon. While these fields evolved to establish stable funding systems, they also hosted prolonged debates around what “counted” as an American art form. Those in opera and ballet were among the most contentious. To this day, they remain the least well-attended forms of performing arts in this country, perhaps because they failed to adequately resolve these disputes. These arguments over the boundaries of each field were focused on *who* is an artist and *what* was the best art, but equally concerned what counted as *American* art.

Let's begin with the question of what defines an American ballet. In 1930, *New York Times* critic John Martin framed an effective response, which is worth quoting at length:

The term "American ballet" is open to a diversity of definitions as intricate and hair-splitting as Polonius's catalogue of dramas. For general discussion it falls easily into two main subdivisions, in one of which the 'American' refers to the dancers and in the other to the dances. It is this latter classification, of course, that is more interesting and contains infinitely greater potentialities; but the dance that belongs particularly to American life and thinking must evolve as the self-motivated externalization of this life and thinking. It is not yet matured to the point where it awaits only organization to allow it to function. No amount of money, or favor, or enthusiasm, can force into being an artistic entity dependent upon natural growth and a certain esthetic adventuring cannot be hurried.¹⁰⁸

This debate over which matters more—the national origins of the performers or the choreographer—echoed in debates over what kind of opera could be judged as "American."

Is the first American opera defined by the nationality of its protagonist, subject, musical score, composer, singers, conductor, or language? The first opera written by an American-born composer was William Fry's *Leonora* (1845), and it features that most American mythological character: the self-made man who triumphs over class barriers.¹⁰⁹ Yet Fry obscures its American character by staging it in Spain "during the period of the American conquests"—a strange, imaginary conceit.¹¹⁰

The first opera to focus on an explicitly American subject was also composed by an American: George Bristow's *Rip Van Winkle* (1855), which debuted at Niblo's Garden in New York in 1855.¹¹¹ Before an earlier version of the Garden was destroyed by fire, it hosted P. T. Barnum's first exhibition in 1835, making it an important site for the evolution of American performing arts in several respects.

A third contender for the first American opera is the Met Opera's world premiere of Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* (1910). It is not only set in the American west, with sheriffs, miners, Native Americans, and whiskey-fueled card games, but it is also musically American: Puccini's score includes banjos, and, in Puccini's words, "two cowboys dance, singing a queer song: 'Dooda Dooda, Day.'"¹¹² The opera featured an "all-American" cast including Enrico Caruso, Emmy Destinn, and Pasquale Amato and was conducted by

Arturo Toscanini (all Italians), but the *New York Times* reported that the “auditorium had been specially decorated with Italian and American flags.”¹¹³ The flags must have been a visual reminder to the audience that these Italians sought to stage an American drama.

Another contestant is the January 1920 Met Opera debut of *Cleopatra's Night*, a two-act opera by American composer Henry Kimball Hadley, with libretto by Alice Leal Pollock. Hadley took the baton for the sixth and final performance, making him the first American composer to conduct his own opera at the Met. Moreover, three of the four principle singers were Americans: Orville Harrold, Jeanne Gordon, and Marine Tiffany.¹¹⁴

A final pair of candidates for the first American opera are “Four Saints in Three Acts” and “Porgy and Bess,” both of which premiered in 1934 and “represented effective, new ways of setting text in English, and both incorporated uniquely American stylistic elements (hymn tunes for the former, and jazz for the latter).”¹¹⁵ Obviously, the question of what characterizes an American opera is not an easily settled one.

A similar question was being raised in ballet. By 1938, Lincoln Kirstein began to describe his ballet troupe, Caravan, and the school as “a permanent laboratory for classic dancing by, with and for Americans.”¹¹⁶ As former Caravan dancer Ruthanna Boris proclaimed with some enthusiasm, it was “a dream of American ballet dancers dancing America!”¹¹⁷ And its dancers, choreographers, designers, and audience members *were* Americans; the dance was ballet. But few who saw their performances remarked upon any stylistic innovations that we might define as American. They were, by most accounts, very much in keeping with the Franco-Russian balletic traditions. Moreover, Caravan presented few ballets with explicitly American subjects: *Pocahontas*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Filling Station* each “evinced an explicit commitment to native and vernacular themes, inspired by and in turn contributing to regionalist and politically activist trends in the visual and performing arts in Depression-era America.”¹¹⁸ These were, however, the exceptions within a program that mainly featured European works.

American opera advocates faced similar difficulties: leaders of powerful companies like the Met Opera advertised themselves as American organizations, but audiences failed to find much innovative or valuable content in English-language songs, performers, or American thematic content. With the exception of the program at Columbia University, opera workshops and academic departments, including those at the New England Opera Theatre, The Juilliard School, and the Manhattan School of Music, had students sing English translations of European works.¹¹⁹ Training students in English did

not prepare them for professional work in opera, because most company trustees had successfully insisted on the presentation of foreign language operas.¹²⁰ While workshops and academic departments prepared American singers in English, there were few domestic works to perform, or audiences interested in patronizing them.

Efforts within opera to cultivate a domestic canon were largely unsuccessful. The Met's administration was committed to developing opera and presented a new work almost every year, starting in 1920 and highlighting American composers like Charles Wakefield Cadman. However, few of these were popular with audiences, and "most of them are forgotten."¹²¹ In opera, the need to sell tickets and memberships was at odds with the need to develop an American canon. Opera companies also needed to balance their own legitimacy within the field—operatic excellence—against the desire to generate distinctively American programming or performers. The tension between these was never more clear than in the almost immediately laughable theme that the Metropolitan Opera Guild chose for 1935: "Democracy at the opera."¹²²

By 1940, writers were starting to comment on a "ballet boom" attributed to "the 'seasoning' of a generation of young American dancers, the discovery of a generation of new American choreographers, and the maturation of an educated, sophisticated audience."¹²³ They felt the time was right to build consensus around, and codify, what would become the American balletic canon. The work of defining the boundaries of the field, and, simultaneously, of describing who legitimately belongs within it, of course involved many individuals in a field as large as dance:

This included not only dancers, teachers, and choreographers, but also critics like Denby who laid the foundations for an American school of dance criticism, historians like Lincoln Kirstein who established the first of the city's dance archives at the Museum of Modern Art, photographers, managers, publishers, booksellers, and editors—all of whom in different ways brought the art to its public.¹²⁴

Kirstein's status within the field and self-stylized reputation as an innovator made him one of the most powerful actors in the field.

Lincoln Kirstein placed himself at the forefront of these efforts to define American ballet through a series of lectures and publications, pointing toward the importance of public communication to artistic legitimation. In the fall of 1936, after returning from the summer Caravan tour, Kirstein and

several dancers presented a lecture-demonstration on “the development of the ballet” at the New School in New York, part of a series of talks on the topic of “The Dance in the Social Scene.”¹²⁵ In 1942, Kirstein began a six-year tenure as editor of *Dance Index*, a magazine that published illustrated scholarly texts on a spectrum of dance topics; it would later be bound and serve as a critical reference work for dance scholars. Kirstein’s desire to secure for himself a position as the most esteemed expert on American ballet drove him to publish a book on the history of the form, *Movement and Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet*, which detailed fifty masterworks, tracing the history of the ballet and including hundreds of images.¹²⁶ In each of these efforts, Kirstein did the work of a reputational entrepreneur, deploying his own legitimacy in the service of asserting the content of an American ballet canon and its conventions.

Decades later, the work of establishing an American balletic and operatic canon was still not complete. Private foundations tried to turn the tide in both fields, providing the resources necessary to engender robust domestic production. On December 16, 1963, the Ford Foundation announced it was undertaking a ten-year, \$7.7 million aid program to support ballet companies associated with George Balanchine, and to support his School of American Ballet.¹²⁷ These efforts were advanced two years later by the National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, established in 1965.¹²⁸ Yet Balanchine chose to make his company an auxiliary to the Met Opera, causing influential dance critic John Martin to ask: “Is the organization to attempt the fulfillment of its original policy of developing an American ballet, or is it to follow the direction of its present season and go on being merely ‘Les Ballets Americans?’”¹²⁹ It seemed to many that Balanchine had given up on the potential audience for ballet, and delivered American ballet back to opera audiences.

Foundation support for opera did not yield better results than it had in dance. The Julliard Foundation, as an institution charged with the cultivation of singers, provided a grant earmarked to support American opera performers.¹³⁰ But the financial incentive to satisfy the Julliard Foundation was at odds with the Met Opera leadership’s need to “perform the ‘sacralized repertoire’ with the highest quality performers to retain its ‘high culture status,’” and this meant importing European operas and European operatic singers.¹³¹ The NEA began funding opera in 1966, and a 1971 grant helped the newly formed national service organization, OPERA America, establish an office.

And then, “opera was made un-popular.”¹³² It eventually would become one of the least frequently enjoyed forms of American culture. Only 2 percent of Americans reported that they attended a live opera in 2014, according to the National Endowment for the Arts. Ballet did not fare much better, capturing only 2.7 percent of Americans in 2011.¹³³ Yet ballet and opera connoisseurship continue to be the most strongly “classifying” activities, in part because the group that participates in it is so small, so well educated, and so rich.

Heading into the Great Depression

By the outbreak of the World War I, reputational entrepreneurs were advocating for distinctively *American arts*. The bohemians and educators, Jews, professors, and women of the Little Theatre movement presented an “American belief that theatre is spiritually and emotionally fulfilling, socially elevating, of civic importance, a site for assaying social change.”¹³⁴ Modern dance advocates wanted “new-found personal, physical and sexual freedom, particularly for women.”¹³⁵ Even the largely conservative ballet field “evinced an explicit commitment to native and vernacular themes, inspired by and in turn contributing to regionalist and politically activist trends in the visual and performing arts in Depression-era America.”¹³⁶

If the first wave of artistic legitimation in America established the path by which high art was made, the second wave struggled to steer it toward a vision of what an *American* high art must be. That vision was still blurry; debates raged around the importance of thematic content and staffing. Reputational entrepreneurs sought to shape the mythological origin stories and collective sentiment in the field, both in their essays and presentations, as well as in their omissions and silences. Lincoln Kirstein, the progenitor of American ballet, began to omit any mention of the private parties Ballet Caravan performed at society homes. Some dance historians have suggested that Kirstein may not have wanted to advertise elite support for his early work because such support would be incommensurate with the politically leftist ethos he later assigned to his ballet troupes.¹³⁷ The significance of politically progressive definitions of American arts, built on regionalist or local concerns, free inquiry, and experimentation, and designed to foster a civically engaged public, lit a spark that would transform into a raging fire during the New Deal era.

That era would begin in September 1929, when the London Stock Exchange crashed after English investor Clarence Hatry and his associates

were jailed for fraud and forgery. A little more than a month later, panicked trading in the United States resulted in a two-day market loss of over \$30 billion, marking the start of what is now known as the Great Depression.

The brief, fifteen-year period between 1930 and 1945 may have had the most profound effect of all on art in America. The New Deal arts programs—work subsidy for unemployed artists—paid for the production of a great number of artworks and employed thousands of artists. But the more impactful consequence of these programs may have come from an increasingly broad definition of the arts. That expanded definition has continued to influence the American arts and to define the character of artistic legitimation in this country. If the first wave established the pathway for artistic legitimation, and the second contoured it, the massive injection of federal dollars during the New Deal both accelerated the pace of artistic legitimation and widened the path, allowing new and more diverse forms of cultural work to be seen as art.

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